

Mr. President, honourable delegates:

My first words must be to thank the Canadian government for having invited me to join its delegation for this day when the General Assembly is celebrating the 40th anniversary of the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. This is for me a very special occasion. I was present, in my capacity as the director of the Division of Human Rights, in the Palais de Chaillot in the night of 10 December, 1948 when the Declaration was adopted. The Assembly's Third Committee had just devoted some 85 meetings to its discussion and amendment of a draft declaration that had been prepared by the Commission on Human Rights. I had sat through all these meetings at the side of the Committee's chairman, the late Charles Malik - who was, by the way, one of the principal architects of the Declaration. I had also worked on the Declaration with the Human Rights Commission and its two drafting committees. You can imagine, Mr. President, with what emotion I now address this Assembly, 40 years after it adopted the Declaration.

A proper history of the Declaration relating the reasons that prompted its adoption, describing its juridical character and discussing the importance that it has acquired over the years morally, politically and legally, still remains to be written. I will not attempt to fill this gap today. I want, however, in the short time that has been allocated to me, to say something about the moral and political authority of the Declaration, its status in international law, the close relationship between respect for the rights enunciated in it and the peace of nations, how the new world law of human rights, which it has largely inspired, is helping to change the nature and structure of traditional international law, and, finally, something about the mechanisms that exist at the world level for its implementation.

Immediately after its adoption, the Universal Declaration acquired a moral and political authority equal, if not superior, to that of any other contemporary international instrument. The late Eleanor Roosevelt used to call it the Magna Carta of Mankind; and, in a recent speech before this Assembly, His Holiness Pope John Paul II referred to it as the "the basic inspiration and cornerstone of the United Nations". No other international instrument has ever better reflected the aspirations of mankind. It quickly became a standard by reference to which the conduct of governments in their relations with individual men and women is judged. Its influence is reflected in the law and jurisprudence of many countries. And it has inspired a whole new body of international law, including the two United Nations Covenants on Human Rights.